focus on women

UNITED NATIONS

The Girl Child

"Why did you come, O girl, when we wished for a boy? Take the jar and fill it from the sea. May you fall into it and drown."

— Ancient folk-song

Girls and women face inequality everywhere, but in many countries they do not even get a fighting chance to lead healthy, productive lives. Instead, they are devalued as human beings from the day they are born — and even before. In countries where a preference for sons is strong, girls are often aborted or killed as infants. Harvard economist Amartya Sen estimated that, in 1990, 100 million fewer women were alive than projected by demographic studies. Abortion, infanticide and other practices harmful to girls were clearly implicated in the numbers of "missing women."

Millions of girls are raised in an environment of neglect, overwork, and often abuse, simply because they are female. In many countries girls are fed less than their brothers, forced to work harder, provided less schooling and denied equal access to medical care. They marry earlier and face greater risks of dying in adolescence and early adulthood because of early and too closely spaced pregnancies. Their impaired health and lost opportunities exact a terrible toll on society and on future generations.

Educating girls educates nations

"When I was little, I wasn't allowed to go to school", says Chichani, a Nepalese mother of four daughters. "I was married when I was 13." Like many girls in developing countries, Chichani, now 32, had to take on adult responsibilities and duties when she was just four or five years old. She took care of her younger siblings, cleaned the house, cooked the food, fetched water and wood and helped out in the fields, among other tasks. There wasn't much time left over for school or games in a childhood that ended definitively when Chichani entered into an early arranged marriage.

Discrimination and heavy workloads at home keep many more girls than boys out of school. Statistics underscore their lost educational opportunities.

- 86 million girls — 43 million more than boys — have no access to primary-school education.
- Approximately 500 million children start primary school, but more than 100 million children, two thirds of them girls, drop out

before completing four years of primary school.

- Of the world's 1 billion illiterate adults, two thirds are women.

Discrimination against girls in education prevails in many developing countries, but plagues industrialized countries as well. According to a 1992 report of the American Association of University Women, "School is still a place of unequal opportunity, where girls face discrimination from teachers, in textbooks, in tasks and from their male classmates." Girls receive less attention from teachers, read gender-biased textbooks and are excluded from many male-dominated fields of study.

Inferior education lowers a girl's self-esteem, her employment opportunities and her ability to take part in the world around her. Moreover, a girl's disadvantages are often passed on to her children later in life. Numerous studies have revealed

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that illiterate mothers whose lives are characterized by poverty and gender-based discrimination have daughters who are likely to share a similar destiny.

On the other hand, the advantages of educating mothers are indisputable. Women with schooling tend to delay marriage and childbirth and have fewer children. They also provide their children with better health and nutrition.

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This effect points to a pressing need to improve the conditions of both girls and women. Just as elevating the status of women will ultimately help remove barriers that impede the growth and development of girls, investment in the welfare of girls will lead to improvement in the status of women.

Fortunately, a programme dedicated to improving the status of rural women in Nepal has helped Chichani improve her lot. Through a project called Production Credit for Rural Women, carried out by the Government of Nepal with support from UNICEF, she took out a loan to buy goats and vegetable seeds, and has installed a labour-saving stove in her house. The project has helped her learn to read and write and earn enough money to send her four daughters to school. "My daughters don't want to get married early", she explains. "They want to get an education."

Together, Governments, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken concrete steps to make schools more welcoming to girls. These steps include bringing schools closer to communities, hiring more female teachers, devising meaningful and gender-sensitive curricula, lowering school costs and encouraging girls' participation.

Girls' health & nutrition: second-class fare

Education is not the only area in which girls are short-changed. In places where family resources are scarce and discrimination strong, girls get inferior food and health care. In many countries, girls are breast-fed for shorter periods than boys. A study in India, for instance, revealed that 51 per cent of boys were breast-fed, compared with 30 per cent of girls.

In addition, girls in many parts of the world are taken less often to health centres, have lower rates of immunization and receive less nurturing than their brothers. The inferior care they receive shows up in higher mortality statistics: in Colombia, for every 75 boys under the age of two who die, 100 girls die; in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, every sixth death of a female infant is due to neglect and discrimination.

A girl's poor health and nutritional status may have consequences that last a lifetime. Iron-deficiency anaemia, for example, an affliction resulting from poor eating habits, affects beween 75 and 95 per cent of girls 15 or older in Africa. It is responsible for 20 per cent of all maternal deaths.

Moreover, a girl's poor health is likely to be passed on to the next generation when she becomes a mother, especially if she is uneducated. A United Nations study of 115 countries found that a mother's literacy was more closely correlated with life expectancy at birth than was any other factor. And a mother's education has a greater effect on lowering infant mortality and improving family health than does a father's education.

The adolescent girl: married with children

"It's very difficult and hard ... and painful to have a baby", says Joan, a 16-year-old Jamaican girl, who is pregnant. One of the most painful steps for Joan was dropping out of school and missing out on friends and social activities. Quitting school is a big problem for girls in Jamaica and the Caribbean in general, where 20 per cent of babies are born to teenagers.

In the Caribbean, poverty, peer pressure and inadequate counselling lead many girls to early marriage or pregnancy. In other regions of the world, including parts of Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, the devaluing of girls forces them to marry early and have many babies to increase their chance of having sons. In some African countries, for example, 50 per cent of women give birth before age 20.

The story of Natalyn

Natalyn is from Jamaica, a country where boys and girls have equal access to education. But adolescent girls there face a growing problem: teenage pregnancy. Jamaica has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the world. Peer pressure encourages early sexual experience. Pregnant girls usually drop out of school and soon face a cruel cycle of having more and more children for whom they are ill-equipped to care.

At age 14, Natalyn was pregnant. As she explained, "I was concentrating more on having a boyfriend, being cool, sticking to my friends, doing what they were doing." Frederick, Natalyn's boyfriend, agreed. He described the peer pressure: "Without a girlfriend, your friends will say to you, 'What's wrong?' But with a girlfriend, it's as if you earn some respect."

Natalyn acknowledged that her mother has always encouraged her to concentrate on school. But with friends and other influences, she said, it's hard. "I guess I was trying to prove to myself that I could handle going to school and having a boyfriend, but I really didn't think about it in depth — what dangers it could have, what could happen", she said.

Unfortunately, parents often are reluctant to talk to their daughters about sexuality. Sexual education is generally taught in schools, but usually much too late. As Natalyn said, "I feel a sense of embarrassment talking to older people about sex." But Natalyn feels she should have spoken to her mother. Now she feels keenly that she let her mother down.

Natalyn was able to turn to the Women's Centre of Jamaica, where she continued her education. The Centre assisted her in caring for her child and avoiding a cycle of unwanted pregnancies. Three months after giving birth, Natalyn returned to her school. The Centre monitored her progress until she was able to become self-sufficient and complete her education independently. The Centre has a 98.6 per cent success rate.

Natalyn described the Centre as extremely helpful. "The Women's Centre has been very helpful in that it makes me feel very positive about myself, that it's not the end of the road, that there is some place for me afterwards", she said. "They will send me back to school ... I have another chance."

Adapted from "Rights of Passage", a UNICEF video on the adolescent girl.

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No matter where they live, teenage girls who become pregnant and have babies increase their risk of developing infections and of dying during childbirth compared with women in their prime child-bearing years. Teenage mothers also expose their offspring to higher rates of disease and death than do older mothers. If they are illiterate, the risks are even higher. Several statistics emphasize the hazards of early pregnancy and childbirth:

- Pregnancy-related complications are the main cause of death for 15-to-19 year-old girls worldwide.
- Teenagers account for a quarter of the estimated 500,000 women who die each year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth; 99 per cent occur in the developing world.
- A baby born to a teenager 17 or younger has a 60 per cent greater chance of dying during the first year of life than a baby born to a mother 20 or older.
- Worldwide, one in every 20 teenagers acquires sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. For example, in Rwanda, a recent study revealed that 25 per cent of girls who became pregnant at 17 or younger were HIV-infected.

Even if a teenager is not affected by disease, a young mother like Joan may lose out on education and employment opportunities that many of her friends take for granted.

But thanks to organizations like the Women's Centre Foundation of Jamaica, many teenagers are getting help. Established in 1978, the Foundation, which receives support from UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund and other local and international organizations, has provided counselling or vocational training to 11,000 young women whose average age is 14. With help from the Foundation, Joan hopes to enter sixth form at a local grammar school and later pursue an accounting career.

All work, no play

Nine-year-old Marceline is one of about a quarter-million 'Cinderellas' who keep Haiti's homes running. These young servants, three quarters of whom are girls, are primarily the children of poor rural parents who can't afford to support them.

Marceline lives with her aunt and two cousins in Carrefour, a town on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. She wakes at sunrise and fetches water. Then she buys food in the market and sweeps the house. Next she washes the dishes, while her cousins leave for school. In the evening, after her relatives eat dinner, she gets the leftovers. Finally she goes to sleep, on the floor under her aunt's bed.

Marceline is one of millions of children around the world who are victims of economic exploitation, working at jobs that threaten their health and well-being. Girls like Marceline are susceptible to economic exploitation, and there are millions of others who are even worse off. They face abuse, neglect and various forms of violence, sale, trafficking, abduction, torture and other deprivations of their basic rights and liberty.

While large numbers of girls work for long hours, both inside and outside the home, their labour is often unacknowledged and underrepresented in labour statistics. Several studies have shown substantial inequalities in gender distribution of household tasks and other chores among children:

- Time allocation studies in Côte d'Ivoire indicate that, from age 10, girls and women undertake 67 per cent of the work done by the combined male and female population.
- According to a government study in Nepal, the work burden of girls in both the 6-9 and 10-14 age groups is much heavier than that of boys in the same age groups in both rural and urban areas.
- Working girls face multiple job-related hazards. In match factories in India, girls often begin work at age 5-7 and labour 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Many are exposed to accidental fires and dangerous chemicals.
- Girls who work as domestic servants are extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse by their employers. A 1987 study of 100 families in Peru that employed house-girls found that 60 per cent of the adolescent males in the household had their first sexual encounter with the house-girls.

Because financial difficulties often force both girls and boys to work, solutions to child labour must be linked to efforts aimed at eliminating poverty. Immediate steps to help child labourers should focus on making labour less exploitative of children's age and sex and more conducive to their overall development. Other initiatives might include government legislation and strict enforcement to protect the rights of girls in the home, workplace, school and playing fields; greater recognition of the work of girls and women; non-formal training and education strategies to bring education to girls in the workplace; and provision of more creative and less exploitative environments for working girls.

In South Asia and other parts of the world, UNICEF is working with Governments, NGOs and the International Labour Organisation, among other UN agensies, to protect children from exploitation and provide them with education in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

On the streets

"After three months, I was completely demoralized", says Rosa, referring to her life as a 17-year-old Colombian prostitute. "I lost contact with my family and remained in that situation for many years."

Many girls like Rosa turn to the streets as a place to live to escape physical and sexual abuse or poverty at home. But the streets rarely offer a secure haven from their woes. Lacking permanent shelter and guardians, girls frequently become involved in prostitution, drug trafficking and petty crime. They also suffer several health-related problems, such as malnutrition and sexually transmitted diseases.

At least 100 million children worldwide are believed to live at least part of the time on the streets.

Childhope USA, an international NGO trying to improve the lives of street children, estimates that girls constitute up to 30 per cent of street children in many developing countries. Helping some of Brazil's street children is SOS Crianca, an NGO that has emphasized peer counselling and training in personal health and safety.

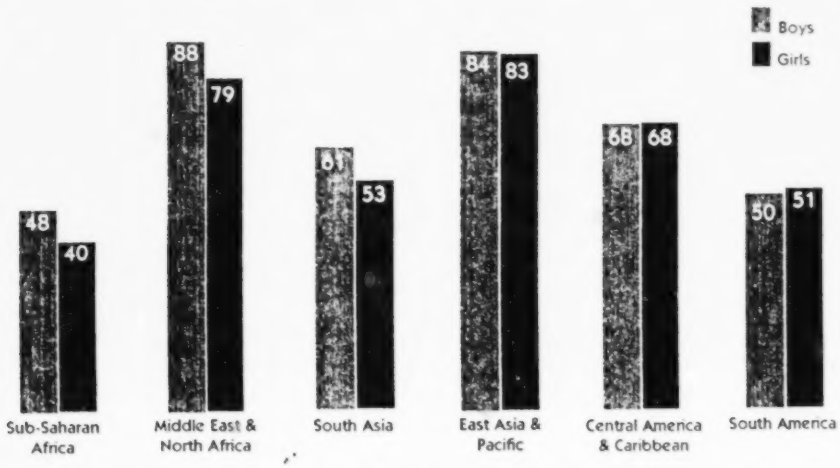
When tradition is harmful

Over the past decade, female genital mutilation (FGM) has emerged as a primary focus of concern. This painful operation, carried out to preserve a girl's virginity and ensure her marriageability, endangers her physical and emotional health throughout her life.

According to the World Health Organization, about 2 million girls undergo FGM every year. The practice occurs in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia as well as in immigrant communities in Europe, North America and Australia.

The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women identified FGM as an act of violence against girls. Its eradication will require long-term commitment and collaboration among Governments, development agencies, NGOs and, most importantly, the communities

% of girls and boys reaching grade 5



The discrepancy between boys and girls in East Asia and the Pacific, and in Central America and the Caribbean, may be greater than shown here, as a number of countries in these two regions have no recent gender-differentiated data for the percentage of children reaching grade 5.

Source: UNICEF, *The Progress of Nations 1994*

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in the countries where it is practised. The Inter-African Committee (IAC) on Traditional Practices, headquartered in Geneva, and the Commission for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilation, headquartered in Paris and founded by a Senegalese woman, are two agencies leading the fight against FGM. IAC has more than 30 National Committees in Africa actively working against this practice.

Daily work burden of children in Nepal

Most boys in Nepal work half the hours worked by girls.

Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, *Work Burden of a Girl Child in Nepal*, Kathmandu 1990.

A global agenda for girls

Several international treaties have drawn global support for the needs and rights of girls and women. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration of the World Summit for Children in 1990 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1981 endorsed the right of girls and women to equal opportunities in health, education and employment. In addition, these treaties specifically protect children and women against all forms of exploitation and abuse.

Issues of equality and opportunity for girls and women were given high priority at the 1995 World Social Summit in Copenhagen and feature prominently at the Fourth World Conference on Women. These global commitments have been reaffirmed and strengthened by several regional declarations, including the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which declared 1991-2000 "The Decade of the Girl-Child".

It is up to Governments, individuals and communities to ensure that these declarations and promises translate into enforceable laws and policies that promote a better future for girls everywhere. An investment in girls is an investment in the future.

Written in association with UNICEF